

VZCZCXRO4716

PP RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV

DE RUEHMD #0635 0941611

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 041611Z APR 07

FM AMEMBASSY MADRID

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2226

INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHLA/AMCONSUL BARCELONA PRIORITY 2599

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0338

UNCLAS MADRID 000635

SIPDIS

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EUR/FO FOR FARAH PANDITH

EUR/PGI FOR IVAN WEINSTEIN

EUR/PPD FOR ANNE BARBARO AND JEAN DUGGAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KISL PREL PGOV SP

SUBJECT: DCM OBSERVES MUHAMMAD'S BIRTHDAY AT MARBELLA MOSQUE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: During a visit to the Costa del Sol in Andalucia, the DCM toured Marbella's beautiful Rey Abdelaziz Al-Saud Mosque and, at the prompting of Imam Alla Bachar, gave impromptu remarks to the assembled congregation of approximately 50 believers on March 31. Alla Bachar gave a sermon rooted in the common history of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity and the need for mutual respect and understanding among these faiths. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) As part of post's continued Muslim engagement effort, the DCM visited the Rey Abdelaziz Al-Saud Mosque on March 31 at the invitation of Imam Alla Bachar. Built by Saudi Prince Salman bin-Abdelaziz al-Saud in 1981, the mosque was the first new Muslim place of worship constructed in Spain since the 15th century. It is also known as the Al-Risalat mosque.

Situated on a 10,000 square-meter site overlooking the Mediterranean Sea on Marbella's western edge, the picturesque mosque's Andalucian architecture and surrounding gardens invoke the splendor of classical Islamic sites in Spain.

¶3. (U) Imam Alla Bachar, who has been imam in Marbella since the mosque's construction, greeted DCM at the entrance to the mosque and brought him inside the musalla, where to DCM's surprise approximately 50 congregants (including women and children) were seated together in a horseshoe awaiting his arrival. Unlike the Spanish occupants of high Marbellan society, the attendees were middle to lower-middle class; the women wore hijabs without veils. Although there were some Spanish converts, the majority were North African immigrants.

The attendees then prayed in observance of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday.

¶4. (U) Bachar then delivered a positive and constructive sermon that emphasized the common threads that run among the three religions of Abraham, the importance of Moses' ten commandments, and the special place In Islam of Jesus the Prophet, who first introduced a conception of paradise. Bachar stopped to note that paradise was for those who were good and righteous, however, not for people who commit monstrous crimes in this world. Bachar mentioned the principle of turning the other cheek, also introduced by Jesus. He noted that almost the entire congregation of the mosque were guests in Spain and that as guests it is proper to follow the rules of the host. He noted that Spain has provided them with the right to worship as they please and they must in turn respect the laws and traditions of the Spanish people.

¶5. (U) Bachar asked the DCM to offer some words to the congregation. The DCM spoke of his and his wife's own experience as immigrants to the United States and of how immigration is a key part of the American experience. The

DCM noted that the U.S. is a country made up of peoples from all different races, ethnic groups, and religions. The U.S. prides itself on respecting all cultures and religions and derives strength from its diversity. He went on to describe the Muslim community in the U.S. and how it has made enormous contributions with its strong commitments to family, values, work ethic, and entrepreneurship.

¶6. (U) After the prayer service, the congregation adjourned to another room for tea and pastries, where the DCM engaged with the congregants for about 30 minutes before departing. While he received a somewhat wary reception in the musalla, the congregants were far more engaging toward him after the service.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Imam Alla Bachar has a daughter studying in Orlando who he said has had a very positive experience in the United States. He said that her impression of the United States was radically different from the caricatures often portrayed in European and Arab media. The DCM found Bachar to be a serious and dedicated individual and would encourage involving him in further engagement events where possible. While most of those present were North African, some Saudis were also in attendance, which is not surprising as Marbella has long been a popular playground for wealthy Arabs. END COMMENT.

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